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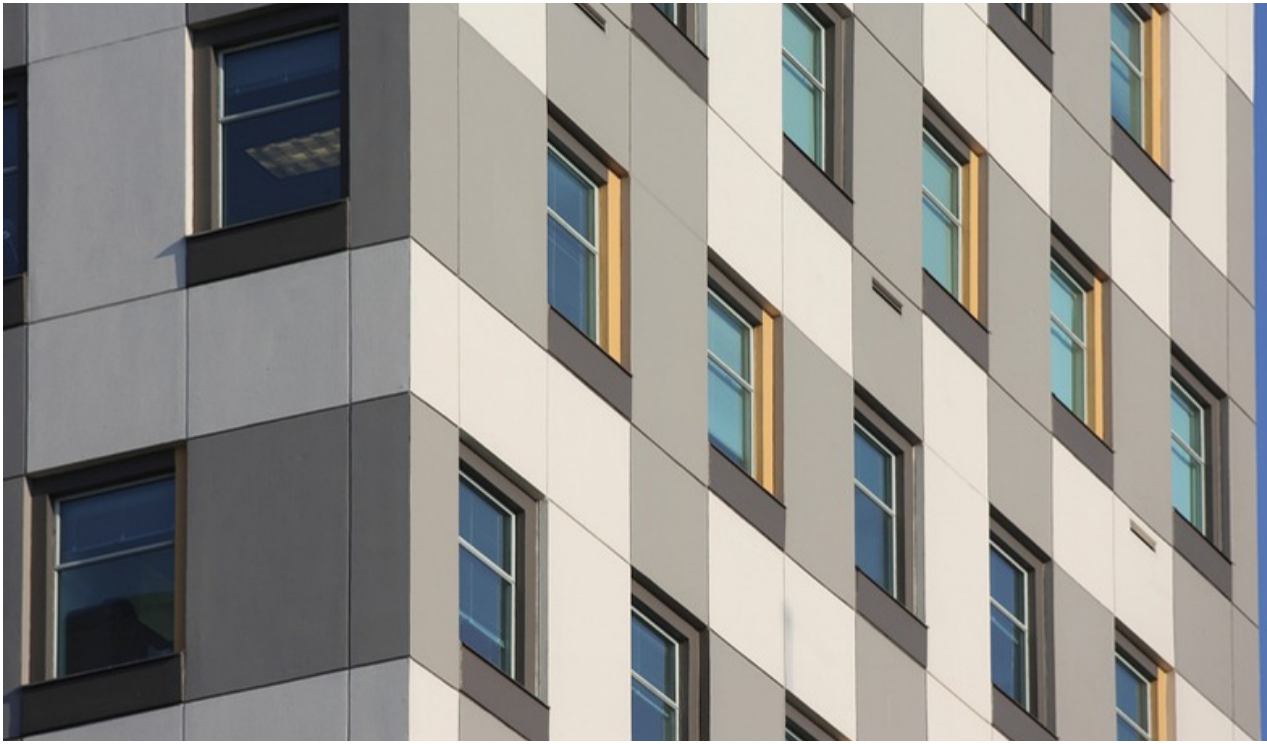
THE PH5 PHILOSOPHY

**“No Alterations Made Is the Best
Compliment We Can Receive.”**

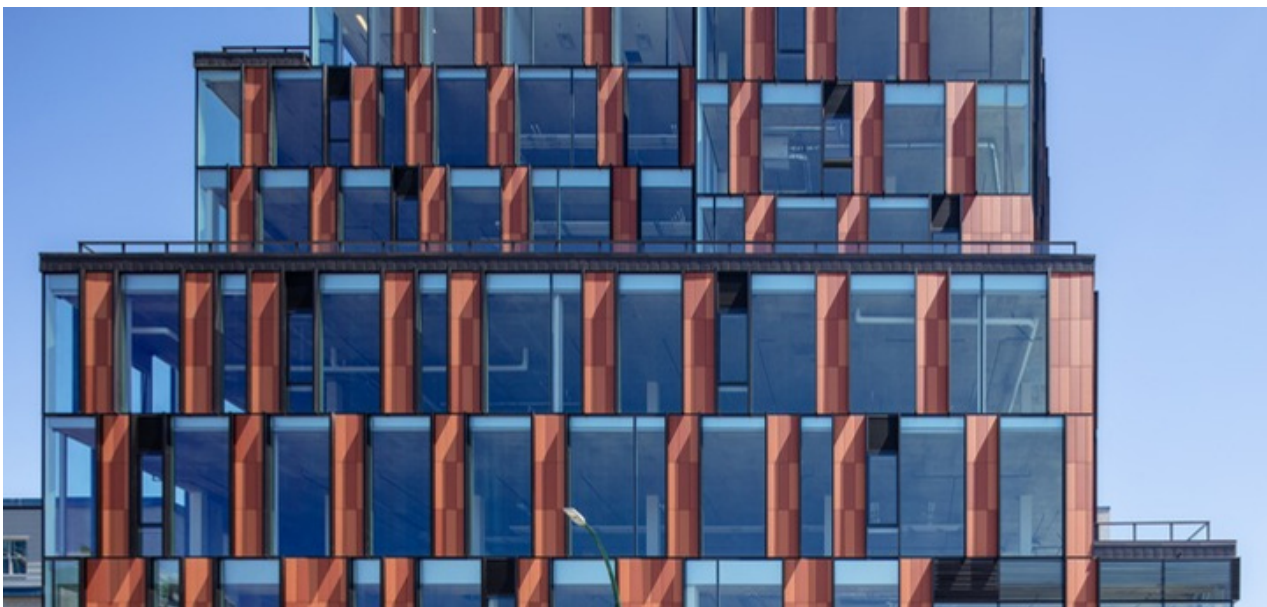
Architecture • Renovation • Urban Design
Gastown, Vancouver, British Columbia

*Inside a Vancouver architecture practice built on process, not style — and a discipline that keeps
buildings working for the people inside them, years after they open.*

ph⁵ architecture inc



For nearly two decades, ph5 architecture has built quietly and deliberately in Vancouver. No signature style. No single project type. Just a rigorous process, a belief that buildings should serve the people inside them, and a growing body of work that is starting to get the recognition it deserves.





Peeroj Thakre founded ph5 architecture in 2008. *On paper, Henning Knoetzele was a shareholder from the start. In practice, Knoetzele joined formally in 2015. What they built together in the decade since is harder to describe than it is to recognize: a practice defined not by a signature aesthetic or a preferred project type, but by a way of working.*

The project most associated with ph5 in recent years is Focal on 3rd, an eight-storey hybrid industrial building on a fifty-by-one-hundred-and-twenty-foot lot in Vancouver's Mount Pleasant neighbourhood. It has collected awards. It has been written about. But to hear Thakre and Knoetzele discuss it, the building is less a statement of arrival than a demonstration of method. The real story of ph5 is the method.

THE FOUNDING

Thakre started the firm with a background in community buildings and a parallel interest in public realm installations. In the early years, ph5 also operated a nonprofit called Urban Republic, which produced a series of public interventions visible on the firm's website. That experiment eventually gave way to the demands of running an architecture practice, but the instinct that produced it has never left.

"You really do have to focus on the architecture firm," Thakre says. "But the ethos carried through."

The work in those early years was mostly renovation: projects that arrived rather than projects that were chosen. Over time, the firm worked its way back toward the community and public clients that now make up the majority of its workload. The private sector has slowed across British Columbia, but ph5 has found its footing elsewhere, in libraries, community centres, churches, and urban design studies for municipalities grappling with what their streets are actually used for.



"The process does not end at handover. Ph5 returns to completed projects one, two, and three years after occupancy to measure whether the building is performing as intended. No alterations made is the best compliment we can receive."



THE PROCESS

Ask either principal how ph5 operates and the answer begins not with style or typology but with process. The firm describes its approach as integrated design, though Knoetzele notes that the term now has wide currency: "We have done this for many years. It just finally has a name."

The emphasis begins at pre-design. Before a line is drawn, ph5 spends significant time engaging with the client to understand what the project actually requires, what success means for that particular client, and what the constraints of the site, the budget, and the construction market will actually allow. For projects in existing buildings, this means a careful reading of what is already there and how to work with it rather than against it.

The integrated design approach means consultants are brought in early, and where possible, so is the contractor. The goal is to avoid value engineering by making sound decisions before the project reaches the point where costs need to be cut. "We are very comfortable saying: this is the best option," Knoetzele says. "Value engineering becomes unnecessary because we have already done that work." Construction documents are designed to the ability of the people who will actually build the project. Specifications are written to work for the contractor as much as for the client. Lead times for materials are tracked from early in the process.

The result, the firm says, is projects that stay on schedule and on budget reliably. Site presence during construction administration is a point of particular emphasis. "We go to site often," Thakre says. "Working with the contractor and subtrades on site to solve issues as they arise is usually the most successful and most cost-effective approach." Over the years that presence has built a reputation.

Contractors are comfortable calling ph5 to the site. Problems get resolved before they become crises.

The process does not end at handover. Ph5 returns to completed projects one, two, and three years after occupancy to assess whether the building is performing as intended. The firm looks for alterations or additions made after handover; if there are none, it takes that as a sign the original design was right. "Ideally, the project looks the same three years after it is in use as it did at the outset," Knoetzele says. Two examples illustrate what this looks like in practice. At a Burnaby library, the firm installed an automated book-handling machine and redesigned the work area. One to two years later, the librarians reported that it was the branch where the sorting system worked best, and that it had meaningfully improved their daily workflow.



At a church completed a few years earlier, Thakre visited on a Saturday morning to find the building in full use: families with children, a senior group, throughout the whole space alive across the week rather than reserved for Sunday. "That is not accidental," she says. "That is the fulfillment of the vision that was set at the beginning."

ON RENOVATION AND ADAPTIVE REUSE

Ph5 declines the label of adaptive reuse specialists, not out of false modesty but out of a genuine resistance to categories that limit. "I find these descriptors too limiting," Knoetzele says. "To us, working with an existing building is just a logical extension of what we already do."

The firm's position is that renovation, particularly of post-Second World War buildings now reaching the age of major mechanical and structural intervention, is as intellectually demanding as new construction, and in some ways more so. There is a level of care and attentiveness involved in renovation that is different from a new building. You have to understand what the existing structure is telling you and how to respond to it.

Vancouver does not have a deep stock of heritage buildings. What it has, increasingly, is a generation of mid-century structures that are good buildings with good bones, requiring the kind of thoughtful intervention that can make them viable for another fifty years. Ph5 is currently working on several of them.

URBAN DESIGN AND THE PUBLIC REALM

Alongside the architecture practice, ph5 has carries out urban design studies.

"We are not urban planners by any means," Knoetzele says. "We are designers. We look at what physically needs to change in public space for it to work better for the people who live or visit there."

The firm's office is in Gastown, the historic neighbourhood in central Vancouver that draws significant tourism while also accomodating social housing, local businesses, and a complex mix of uses that creates ongoing tension between different definitions of what the neighbourhood is for.

Ph5 has been working on the Gastown public realm through design studies since 2019, in collaboration with the Gastown Business Improvement Association and with the City of Vancouver's Engineering Services Department.

Knoetzele notes that this kind of work, architecture-adjacent but data-driven and engagement-based, is relatively new in Vancouver. As far as he knows, there are few architecture or landscape architecture office doing something quite like it. It is, he says, a natural evolution from the public installation work that defined the firm's early years.



"As we can avoid destructing existing buildings, that is the best way to limit our carbon output."
— Henning Knoetzele

FOCAL ON 3RD AND THE QUESTION OF AWARDS

Focal on 3rd sits at 107 East Third Avenue in Mount Pleasant, a neighbourhood transitioning from low-rise industrial to higher-density mixed use.

The building is eight storeys on a fifty-by-one-hundred-and-twenty-foot lot, with light industrial space at grade, offices focused on digital entertainment and technology above, and a programme designed to demonstrate that high-density development can retain, rather than displace, the employment character of urban industrial land.

The facade is its most remarked-upon feature: prefabricated curtain wall panels produced by Phoenix Glass, assembled through a close collaboration between the firm and Jim Gorovich, Owner of Phoenix Glass, who understood the design intent well enough to realize it within the constraints of the assembly system.

The project also incorporates intensive green roof terraces, a car elevator accessing below-grade parking to maximize the site's density, and connection to the Neighbourhood Energy Utility, making it fossil-fuel free.

The building has received the LOOP Design Award in two architectural categories, Architecture MasterPrize honourable mentions, and an AFBC Award of Excellence.

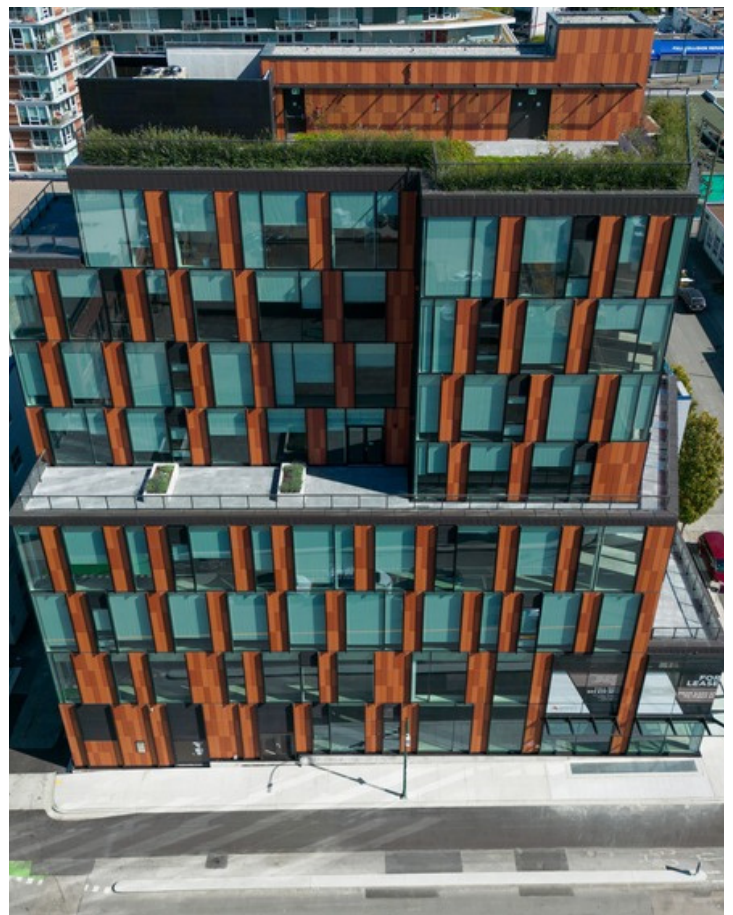
Thakre is measured about awards as a category. Any recognition is nice, she says, but it is not the reason they do what they do. Projects come through good references. It is hard to verify what impact awards actually have on potential clients.

CONTRACTOR RELATIONSHIPS

The collaboration with Phoenix Glass on Focal is an example of something ph5 considers fundamental to how architecture gets made well: genuine mutual respect between the people who draw and the people who build.

"There has to be, from the architect's side, a great deal of respect for the people who build what we are drawing," Knoetze says. "That does not happen often enough."

What made Focal so successful was that the design was clearly articulated on the drawings, Jim Gorovich understood what the firm was trying to do, and the result was a facade that realized the intent within real-world material and assembly constraints. "We create design intent. They create a facade. Those are two very different things. As long as there is mutual respect for each other's work, you can do wonderful things together."





These relationships are built slowly. Ph5 trusts the contractors and subtrades it works with and engages them in genuine dialogue rather than simply handing over drawings. The second time around working with a contractor, Knoetze says, it just gets easier. You already have the relationship and can move faster. Good relationships with your client, your trades, your contractor, and even the permit officials are all incredibly important for a building to actually get realized.

SUSTAINABILITY

Much of ph5's project base is with municipalities, and electrification of building systems has become nearly standard across that work. Where the firm is touching mechanical systems, those systems are moving off natural gas. The exceptions are narrow: some existing community kitchen infrastructure where the available electrical capacity cannot support commercial cooking equipment.

On the materials side, formal sustainability certification is typically the client's decision. Ph5 uses the materials and resources criteria within rating systems as an internal framework for judgment, ranking material selections by whether they are non-toxic, circular, or locally sourced, even when certification is not the goal. "We try to find material specifications that fit the project," Thakre says. "Even if we are not required to abide by an outside standard, we try to incorporate sustainable products where they fit."

PEOPLE AND CULTURE

Ph5 is a small firm, currently seven people. In a firm that size, Thakre notes, every hire shapes the culture of the office in a meaningful way. The firm looks for both skills and alignment on values. It has hired people who did not yet have the full skill level a position required but demonstrated the right fit, on the theory that skills can develop but values rarely change.

THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

After nearly eighteen years, Thakre says the firm is hitting its stride. The process is refined enough to be repeatable and teachable. She would like to see ph5 grow, take on more complex projects, and expand into housing, a sector both principals find compelling and have never found quite the right entry point into.

"I feel like this process is now repeatable and expandable to new employees," she says. "I want to do good work that really hits this idea of being together better, as much as I can before I retire."

Knoetzele frames it differently but arrives at the same place. The firm has never been interested in doing a particular type of building. It is interested in solving problems that matter. If a developer wanted to genuinely revisit how residential buildings get financed, designed, and built in Canada, he says, ph5 would be interested. Not because residential is a box to check, but because the question is real and the answer has not been found yet.

In a city whose relationship with its built environment is being renegotiated block by block, ph5 is making a particular kind of argument: that process matters more than product, that buildings should outlast the moment in which they were built, and that the measure of a good project is whether the people inside it, years later, still find it exactly right. That is a long game. Ph5 seems comfortable playing it.



"There are many issues to be solved and we are interested in solving them. But it has to be fulfilling. These values need to be attached to it. Without that it just becomes a pretty dull exercise."

— Henning Knoetze

